

# Why every student and job applicant needs to learn design-led thinking

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The unprecedented scale of challenges that companies and industries are facing globally, means the need to do things differently is greater than ever. Design thinking provides a way to engage with the world's complex challenges in a creative and regenerative way.

Preparing for the world of work can be a nerve-wracking experience in this day and age. Everyone knows that AI and technology are changing the way we work and in a post-Covid world graduates need to be ready to adapt to new roles, but what skills specifically can help get them there? The World Economic Forum's [Future of Jobs Report](#) lists critical thinking and problem solving as priority skills, but it seems that even what defines critical thinking is shifting.

In the past, critical thinking involved reflection, independent thought, and the ability to remain objective while searching for a solution. This is not an ideal method anymore – it simply doesn't hold up to the complexity, ambiguity and disruption of the world we live in.

The critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are the most relevant today and will be in even more demand in the future, take a human-centred approach that is big on problem exploration, empathy and co-creation, understands the value in connecting with local realities, knowledge and systems, and recognises the power of creativity and wild ideas. This is called design-led thinking.

## Are you a design thinker?

Yes, you are! We all have an essential ability to empathise with people facing challenges that need to be solved. We also know how important it is to put our heads together to address complex problems, and we appreciate that diversity gives us a rich basket of local knowledge to draw on. And even if you haven't used visual thinking or had a wild idea since Grade R, we're all still capable of developing a creative way to think.

Unlocking the power of design-led thinking is accessible to everyone. Microsoft's Kevin Wo, managing director for Singapore has called design thinking a [key skill for mastering the future](#). And in the next five years it will likely become standard practice everywhere because it's by far the most effective tool we have to help us find the best solutions to the world's biggest problems in a meaningful and sustainable way.

## What employers look for in the job market

Companies and industries face challenges today on an unprecedented scale. Doing business in a globalised world, means that everything is becoming more intertwined and connecting us in ways they never have before. Design thinking provides a way to engage with this complexity in a creative and regenerative way.

In fact, the business case for Design Thinking is so compelling and is growing to such an extent, that we are seeing a rapid onboarding of design-led thinkers who understand its concepts and can apply the tools and techniques needed to help solve ambiguous or complex challenges while coping with a high degree of uncertainty.

Design thinking has the potential to unleash people's full creative energies, win their commitment, and radically improve processes, argues Jeanne Liedtka in [Harvard Business Review](#). One of the reasons it's thought to be so effective is that its approach helps to counteract human biases that thwart creativity while at the same time following a structured process to tackle a particular challenge.

## Our hope for a sustainable future

This ability to do things differently is especially needed when trying to meet the expectations placed on industries and organisations to design products and services that speak to the challenges of building a sustainable future. Solving such big and intractable problems by choosing from a set of worn-out strategies just doesn't cut it anymore.

The UN Development Programme has been vocal about why it [favours Design Thinking](#) as the best tool to move organisations towards achieving the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals. This is because the approach, instead of being linear, involves looping back and forth through the various phases of ideation and exploration, gathering diverse points of view along the way, through synthesis, prototyping and testing. The resulting solutions are more likely to be sustainable precisely because they're designed to evolve through a continuous feedback loop that places the needs and desires of the human beings most affected, at the centre of the solution, whether it's a product, service or system.

## Starting the design-led journey

Design Thinking is more than a process or method used to solve a set of challenges. It's a mindset, a way of thinking that can be applied over again to new challenges in any setting. Wherever innovation or a different way of thinking is needed, it can adjust to different programmes and curricula, methodologies and business practices, corporate strategies and social innovation models. Design thinkers learn how to see real-world problems and use tools and techniques in a way that leads to innovative solutions no matter what their location or context.

Since Design Thinking makes the world a better place, taking onboard the skills needed to apply it in practice is an exciting journey for every practitioner. No matter how big, small, or niche the problem, there's a solution waiting to be imagined.

But to get a real-world view of Design Thinking in practice, it's important to participate in a programme that has partnerships with the private, public, academic and community-based sectors. This exposes students to experiential training that involves working on real-world projects and challenges.

Ultimately, the student of design thinking needs to arrive with an open mind and a curiosity not only about what they can get from design thinking but what they can add back to the process itself. In a very real sense, we are all on a continuous journey towards building a better world that is easier to navigate and safer and more sustainable for all.

*Richard Perez is the founding director of Africa's first school dedicated to Design Thinking, the Hasso Plattner d-school AFRIKA at the University of Cape Town, which offers a number of teaching and learning courses including their flagship [Foundation Programme in Design Thinking](#).*

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